# "Not Writing It Out But Writing It Off": Preparing Multicultural Teachers for Urban Classrooms

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## Introduction

Immersion in a linguistically and culturally diverse urban community in combination with coursework that relies on process writing can help prospective teachers gain awareness and understanding of diverse communities. Utilized as an instructional approach, process writing (Graves, 1983) enables prospective teachers to construct and reconstruct knowledge gained in the field by drafting, peer reviewing, and redrafting accounts of their observations and reactions, while collectively scrutinizing their own underlying assumptions in such written work.

Incremental meaning-making processes can effectively lead prospective teachers to: (a) understand/overcome biases within communities of learners; (b) identify researchable issues anchored in the communities where they learn to teach; and (c) collaboratively enhance their own perspectives with regards to the impact of context in teaching, learning, and assessing.

This article addresses the following research questions: How do prospective teachers develop understanding of a diverse context through immersion? How does process writing impact such development? These are questions in which I became interested after data collected from a prior cohort of thirteen students suggested that prospective teachers' pervasive reliance on deficit views of diverse populations strengthened during urban field experiences, in spite of coursework aimed at developing pluralistic views of difference (Abbate-Vaughn, 2004). Data for this study were collected from a cohort of sixteen students. The article focuses on one intervention—that of process writing—examined in depth through the work of one *peer review writing group* (PRWG) composed of four prospective teachers.

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## Preparing Multicultural Teachers for Urban Classrooms

From various perspective and disciplines, educational researchers have proposed sets of specific guidelines for the preparation of urban teachers (Comer & Maholmes, 1999; Haberman, 1996; Oakes *et al*., 2002; Weiner, 1999). These guidelines are inextricably linked to the ever increasing complexity of urban school settings that not only include racial and socioeconomic diversity, but also linguistic, national origin, and religious diversity.[1]

Population growth projections for the United States indicate that by the year 2035, youth of color and white youth will each account for 50 percent, while children of color will become the majority thereafter (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1996). Metropolitan areas in the United States house growing linguistically and culturally diverse groups.

For example, it is estimated that more than one third of the population in New York City was born in a foreign country (Rivera Batiz, 1996). The largest 65 urban school districts enroll 15 percent of all schoolchildren, and over 31.8 percent of all children in whose homes a language other than English is spoken (Council of the Great City Schools, 2005). Also, the ethnic/racial student breakdown in those large cities is even more revealing: while Latino children are a mere 18.5 percent of the total student population in American public schools, that percentage grows to over 26.3 when only considering large urban school districts. Concomitantly, African American children, who are almost 17 percent of the nationwide public school student population, represent 32.6 percent of the population in large urban school districts (Council of the Great City Schools, 2005).

Some of those urban school districts report student bodies representative of 41 language backgrounds, which include Spanish but also less traditional languages such as Somali, Serbo-Croatian, and Hmong (Antunez, 2003). Most compellingly, whereas almost 40 percent of the public school students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds nationwide (as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch) that number raises to over 62 percent when considering the largest urban school districts alone (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003). Student diversity, although rapidly growing, will continue to concentrate in ten percent of all United States counties, where race and ethnicity intersect poverty (Hodgkinson, 2002).

The complexity of urban work settings inevitably poses a challenge to multicultural teacher educators in charge of preparing future generations of teachers. While over 35 percent of school children are of color, only 13 percent of the teachers belong to minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). The cultural, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic mismatch between a still largely mainstream teacher force and their increasingly diverse students has preoccupied researchers for a

while.[2] Research also indicates that white prospective teachers manifest little interest in working in diverse settings (National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2000; Zimpher, 1989; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992) and that, when they do, deficit perspectives of diverse students prevail among them (Irvine, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999).

The disparate backgrounds between white teachers and diverse children, and the inherent shortcomings of "teaching diversity" mainly as university-based coursework or through field placements with limited scaffold, provide support to ideas early advanced by Hilliard (1974) for teacher education to combine school field placements with other experiences in diverse communities. A sizeable amount of research has centered on the many aspects involved in "multiculturalizing" teacher education through academic work and diverse school placements (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005a, 2005b; Banks, 1991; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Murrell, 2001; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996).

Since the early 1990s, an increasing emphasis on taking prospective teachers' preparation beyond the boundaries of the school building—drawing in part from what is known about service learning—has fueled a considerable amount of empirical and conceptual research (Aguilar & Pohan, 1998; Boyle-Baise, 1998; Cooper *et al.*, 1990; Mahan & Stachowski, 1993-4; Melnick & Zeichner, 1996; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Stachowsky & Mahan, 1998; Tellez *et al.*, 1995; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996) and reviews of studies (Root & Furco, 2001; Wade, 2000) that analyze the outcomes and challenges such implementations pose.

One of the assumptions that clearly justifies embedding expanded experiences in diverse settings into teacher education programs is that, by increasing prospective teachers' understanding of diverse learners' contexts, the quality of connections that teachers can make between curriculum and children's prior knowledge is maximized. Another assumption is that fostering relationships between urban parents and students, community agencies, and prospective teachers enables the latter to become knowledgeable of and empathetic to the prevailing customs in the settings where their students are reared, while promoting involvement with the families served by those schools. In the same way that minority students often become cultural and language brokers between school and home (Gentemann, 1983; Tse, 1995), prospective teachers can be prepared to broker the relationship between public schools and diverse home cultures (Gay, 1993; Goodwin, 2000).

To address the challenges associated with a deficit-oriented teacher socialization into the workplace (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996), process writing can be used to facilitate a well-monitored process of ongoing scrutiny and analysis of prospective teachers' evolving conceptualizations. The expectation is that process writing thus delineated facilitates prospective teachers' incremental appreciation for the role their own identities play—particularly for those of middle-class background—in understanding the often overlapping contexts of poverty and cultural and linguistic diversity. The reflective nature of process writing also enables prospective teachers to rethink their roles as cultural brokers and agents of change.

## Study Design

A qualitative descriptive study borrowing from ethnography and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997) techniques was conducted to explore several aspects of an extended urban field experience for prospective teachers in the last year of a five-year teacher preparation program[3] leading to completion of an inquiry project. Set between an urban school district I call Windmill and the university, this article reports on four prospective teachers who belonged to one of four PRWG. Given the intensity of the changes documented in prospective teachers' writing, depth was prioritized over quantity for this article by focusing on one PRWG.

### *Seminar Organization*

As the academic outcome of the yearlong internships, prospective teachers were expected to identify and frame a research question leading to completion of an inquiry project. Given their novice researcher status, structured steps leading to the research proposal required at the end of the first semester were in place. Prospective teachers kept a journal documenting events that had captured their attention, questions that arose as a result of witnessing an event/having an interaction with someone in the school and/or the community, opinions they formed in regards to tasks in which they engaged at the request of their supervisors (school-based and university-based), and any other item they deemed relevant. Prospective teachers scanned their journal entries to identify an educational challenge on which to focus their inquiry projects.

In four seminar sessions of 2.5 hours each, prospective teachers were asked to share a journal entry with which they experienced discomfort and deemed worth "unpacking" with the help of peers. Clustered in their PRWG composed of four members each, prospective teachers opened their journals to the scrutiny of their colleagues. Initially, peer groups were instructed to overlook the technicalities of writing and center their comments and suggestions on the content of their colleagues' journal entries. At the end of each seminar session, prospective teachers were given time to consider and incorporate ideas stemming from the small group discussions into a "seminar journal entry." The journals were further discussed through email conversations between prospective teachers and the seminar instructor.

The remaining five seminar sessions of the semester were devoted to discussions of: (a) readings addressing a variety of urban education issues; (b) ethnic literature relevant to the K-12 population served at the internships; and (c) the technical aspects of developing a research proposal in three sections (introduction, literature review, and methodology). As part of the twenty-weekly hours spent at their internships sites, prospective teachers allocated twenty-percent of the time for peer sharing within their PRWG. That time was also used to further discuss drafts with the school-based supervisors/cooperating teachers of what would eventually become the prospective teachers' inquiry project proposal.

### *Setting*

Windmill, a small urban setting in the Northeast is surrounded by farms and poorly linked through public transportation to more resourceful enclaves. Within the last two decades, what used to be a thriving town of luxurious Victorian homes now stands in disarray. The closing of the mill industry initiated the economic pauperization of the town and the isolation of its minority groups. Windmill exhibits a growing Latino population that mostly comprises Puerto Rican, Dominican and Mexican families and has witnessed a steady "white flight" to the suburban and semi-rural communities around. Latino students at the elementary and middle school levels make up half of those schools' student population.

The prospective teachers' experiences were the outcome of twenty-weekly hour internships in Windmill's schools, and coursework completed both at the university and in selected Windmill sites that included community agencies and schools.

### Participants

Four prospective teachers, two placed at the only large middle school in town and the remaining two in different elementary schools, are the participants on which this study reports and members of one of the four PRWG. They had completed their student-teaching and selected internships of their choice for their fifth and final year in the program. The prospective teachers spent time with students during and after school. Four mainstream monolingual teachers—whose constituencies involved a considerable number of English language learners at diverse stages of oral fluency and reading ability—supervised the participants' internships and had extensive interaction with them. A brief description of the prospective teachers and supervisors[4] follows:

"Sonia" had grown up in a working-class family and attended urban schools. Despite pursuing elementary certification, she selected an internship at the middle school. Sonia worked under the guidance of "Mrs. Lee," a reading resource teacher. Mrs. Lee, a white veteran female teacher, had a deep understanding of balanced reading programs for low achieving readers, but was not very familiar with literature and other resources widely acknowledged as useful for language minority, low-achieving readers.

"Edwina" completed her internship in the same building as Sonia, serving in its after-school program. Her supervisor was "Pat," a white middle-aged female teacher with outstanding managerial skills in charge of an after-school program, who professed a commitment to urban children, although acknowledged she would never send her own children to schools such as the one where she worked.

"Holly" had been raised in an upper middle-class neighborhood by her mother after her parents' divorce. Holly had successfully lobbied to maintain her placement at one of the elementary schools and complete her internship under the guidance of "Laura," a young white female part-time teacher who staffed an *English as a Second Language* (ESL) pullout program without certification in the area.

"Polly" was the daughter of a veteran male math teacher working at the nearby high school, but had been schooled in a suburban district. "Mrs. Smith," a white veteran female teacher who staffed a pull-out, special education program and was actively involved in the teachers' union supervised Polly's work.

Participants were invited to take part in the study and informed consent forms were secured. They were told the data would not be used until grades were posted, to minimize the power relation between instructor and students.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### Data Sources

Over the course of one academic semester, the following data were collected: (1) three drafts for each of the three sections (introduction, literature review and methodology) leading to the four prospective teachers' proposal for research with comments and suggestions from the instructor[5]; (2) three interactive journal exchanges where prospective teachers emailed their journal entries and obtained feedback, comments, and questions from the instructor after those entries had been shared in class with the PRWG; (3) field notes of prospective teachers' interactions from four seminar sessions where students were charged with providing constructive and sensitive criticism to each other's drafts; (4) records of ongoing informal contact between the instructor and prospective teachers' school-based supervisors; and (5) two formal meetings of one hour each between instructor, school supervisors, and interns at the beginning and end of the semester.

### Data Analysis

Prospective teachers' journal entries and ongoing drafts were scrutinized using a discourse analysis technique, which enables the researcher to identify the underlying assumptions behind specific issues (Potter, 1996). This part of the analysis was not intended to provide unequivocal answers, but to force the continuing questioning of what appeared to shape prospective teachers' ideas about diverse children.

All data were also analyzed chronologically by participant and by data source across participants, read and coded for emerging themes by the researcher and a "critical friend" (Stenhouse, 1975) with ample familiarity with the community setting. Peer debriefing supports the credibility of the data analysis in qualitative research and lays the groundwork to support the trustworthiness of the findings (Spall, 1998). Codes that appeared with remarkable periodicity in the data and could potentially become main themes were further compared and discussed across both coded sets of data (Ryan & Bernard, 2001). Additional codes and themes were also borrowed from the literature (Bulmer, 1979) in response to the instructor's goal to move students away from a deficit perspective. As part of the triangulation process (Silverman, 1993), specific statements in the final proposals were confirmed with the participants to verify the reliability of the data analysis (i.e., asking questions such as "Can you elaborate on X point you made in the proposal?").

## Researcher's Dual Role

In my capacity as instructor in the course and supervisor for the Windmill field experiences I was able to develop a close, trusting relationship with the participants, due to the frequency and intensity of our interactions. In that capacity, I was able to document myriad informal interactions and comments, as well as collect their drafts and formal products. To minimize the power differential, prospective teachers were given assurance that participation in the study was completely unrelated to their standing in the course, by making the data unusable until after grades were posted.

### Limitations of the Study

Given the small sample and the duration of the study, its findings can only serve as a roadmap for others dealing with similar goals and contexts. A follow up study to assess prospective teachers' "retention" of culturally-sensitive beliefs during the first years of actual classroom teaching would yield more accurate data on the long-term effectiveness of multicultural teacher education interventions like the one depicted here (see Causey *et al.*, 2000; Lyons, 2005; Quartz *et al.*, 2005).

## "Not Writing It Out But Writing It Off"

In this section I present the four prospective teachers' initial identification of researchable problems as documented in their journal entries. I further develop portraits of the four participants by drawing on data sources where interactions, events, and processes that led to their final research proposals are examined.

### Sonia

Sonia's initial interpretation of "what is wrong" with urban children in general was a depiction of her insights on one particular child she had identified as a potential candidate for her own research. On her first draft introducing the significance of her proposed study, Sonia wrote:

> Families like Analia's struggle just to provide food for their children, which does not leave room for many material possessions. Many families live with relatives just to make ends meet. Some families are even unable to provide basic needs for their children, such as beds or clothing. On top of everything these children are lacking what they need most, parental involvement. (Sonia, DI1[6])

Confused or uncomfortable with the initially accurate description of poverty and its links to preparedness for school, Sonia's interpretation of Analia's plight quickly fell back on familiar terrain--that of blaming the parents for their perceived indifference to school matters.

From then on, Sonia's portrait of Analia relied on a deficit perspective: "These children are often times left at home without any parents to even help them with their homework. Often, those who do not work cannot speak English either" (DI1). In this portion, Sonia failed to identify a positive aspect of this situation--children whose parents manage a series of odd jobs and irregular shifts are also providing an environment that encourages effort and hard work. Yet, not having time to help with homework and not being able to speak English appeared to be an indictment of parental practices rather than an insight as to what schools need to adjust for in order to meet the needs of children from low-income and non-English fluent families.

Finally, Sonia relied on middle-class assumptions to assess Windmill's Latino families' concerns: "As a result, students are faced with the hardship of poverty and language barriers, and therefore, school becomes a second priority" (DI1). Sonia assumed that parental absence in school meetings, scarce time to help with homework and/or lack of fluency in English equates to a lack of interest in academic achievement. She further expanded on this perspective during the seminar session where initial drafts were discussed:

> I went to an urban school, and we were kind of poor, and my mother always made sure that I got proper schooling. She found the best school in the city and made sure that I was accepted. I went to a performing arts school like Fame's. So if my mother could do this, what prevents other parents from having the same commitment to their kid's education? (Sonia, SS3)

Although certainly valid as an emic perspective on urban schools' potential to successfully educate students from working class families, Sonia failed to define what "kind of poor" meant, while pointing that her father worked hard so her mother "could stay home to raise the children." With this latent but barely articulated concern about the relationship between socio-economic status and school success, a subsequent seminar session featured a writing-prompt to entice prospective teachers' exploration in writing of what "being rich" meant (SS4).

Expectedly, a range of existing middle-class values clearly emerged, as "being rich" went from having a summerhouse and frequent shopping trips to New York to owning a boat and a plane to travel the world. Subsequently, prospective teachers were asked to gather in their PRWG and continue to examine assumptions about socio-economic status as they appeared in their journal entries and drafts.

Sonia was not alone in her interpretations of the challenges posed in urban teaching. Her supervisor, Mrs. Lee, was quick to point out the difficulty of teaching reading to "kids who know so little English" and who "lack adult role models who value education" (ISC,12-03), crystallizing the notion that the linguistic minority and low-income social markers were handicaps that threatened the school's mission.

### *Edwina*

Edwina also selected a student with social markers similar to those of Sonia's participant--Latino and low-income--as the protagonist of her inquiry. Edwina's first draft, introducing a student who appeared physically fatigued in class, presented the following portrait:

> My conversation with Nelly helped me to understand that her sleeping problem was very simple. A student who goes to bed at 2am and gets up at 6am to get ready for school cannot possibly stay awake for a full day of classes. Nelly's problem was as much hers as it was her mother's. Nelly's mother was not taking the responsibility of putting her daughter to bed on time. (Edwina, DI2)

Edwina's narrative included a passing explanation of how Nelly's mother worked the second shift during the week, took the bus, and made it home late in the evening, the only time for the single mother to interact her daughter. As other menial jobs occupied her weekends, mother and daughter stayed up late at night watching television. Yet, Edwina's interpretation of the day-to-day accommodations low-income families might be compelled to make was, as much as in Sonia's case, loaded with mainstream middle-class assumptions of appropriate parenting:

> Unfortunately, there are parents in Windmill for numerous reasons that do not get involved with their child's education. The classroom teacher has held meetings with Nelly's mother in order to discuss the issue of getting her to sleep at an appropriate time. However, for a period of time Nelly's sleeping problems continued. (DI2)

Edwina did not appear troubled by the teacher's lecturing the parent in regards to "appropriate" house rules, as if lecturing parents were a common occurrence for teachers working with families of all socio-economic levels. In addition to compensating for low wages by holding several low-paying jobs, and unable to spend quality leisure time with their children or to build reliable support networks, low-income Latino parents often attended school appointments only to find themselves belittled by teachers who had given scarce thought to the consequences of poverty in people's daily lives.

Pat—Edwina's supervisor—did not agree with the stance taken by Nelly's classroom teacher, expressing the opinion that every parent was "entitled to respect" (ISC, 10-03). Yet, every afternoon after work, Pat drove 45 minutes back to the upscale suburban area--known for its good schools and its homogeneous mainstream population--she and her family called home, with which Edwina was familiar. The irony of Pat's professed commitment to urban children and her daily exodus to a safe haven did not initially catch Edwina's attention.

### *Holly*

Some of the prospective teachers appeared less inclined to trivialize student lack of academic success by endorsing it as a "parent problem." Holly, drawing on her own experience growing up in a middle-class, single-parent home, was able to articulate the challenges faced by parents in meeting competing needs within their families. After her parents' divorce, Holly stayed in the care of her mother, an Italian immigrant. Influenced by this experience, Holly exhibited empathy for the plight of immigrant children who show up in schools and are expected to swiftly bridge the dissimilar cultures of home and school. For her first draft, Holly elected to recreate the experience of Lila—an eight-year old Mexican female—on her first day at the school. Lila had spent a few months at a time in several public schools, as her migrant parents moved around following low-wage farm work opportunities. Holly's description was filled with compassion, as she explained how the fearful look in

Lila's eyes--which she attributed to potentially negative welcomes in her far too numerous past school experiences--had prompted Holly to offer Lila drawing paper and color markers as her father went through the hoops of registering Lila in the new school:

> At the site of my offer she began to loosen her grip on her father's arm as she joined me in the classroom to color. Within the confines of the ESL room, Lila was safe. For that moment in time, she was allowed to color freely without being bombarded by the pressures and implications of being yet in another school, with its own battery of tests to measure the child's readiness. (Holly, DI1)

Naive as it may be, Holly had not identified the parents or lack of English fluency as the culprit, but rather the excessive testing and scarce age-appropriate socialization strategies with which schools greeted newcomers such as Lila.

Laura, Holly's supervisor, exhibited an interest in expanding her own context knowledge and was eager to share notes on and ask questions about, for instance, the language input most likely present in the upbringing of a Puerto Rican child whose home language is Spanglish,[7] or a Mexican child whose home language may be either a Mayan dialect or Spanish (ISC, 10-03).[8] Laura's level of awareness of the distinctions amongst her students was particularly necessary for teachers working with similar populations.

### *Polly*

Polly's early journal entries documented the dissonance between the perspective that conceptualizes families and community as essential informants of any purposeful curriculum or school activity and another perspective widely held by many of Windmill's practitioners, that of the teacher as the ultimate holder of relevant knowledge. In summarizing the school's approach to engaging parents' help, Polly identified how the adherence to "busy work" pervaded beyond school hours and into strategies to increase parental involvement:

> On "Parental Involvement Evening," parents are asked to do things such as organizing the books in the library. That seems demeaning. Our students' parents would benefit from having the chance to sit with the staff and see what we're doing. When I talk to parents in the community, they say they'd like to be able to help their kids, although I'm not sure they know how. Shouldn't we be showing them? (Polly, IJE1)

Polly's own journaling and data collection further developed a parallel between the ideal practices promoted in the current literature and actual staff practices she witnessed in school. One such example was that of a monolingual teacher eliciting responses from a kindergarten class of Latino children with low levels of English fluency to an English rhyming exercise:

> The students have an incredibly difficult time with the concept of rhyme, and in addition 4 out of 5 come from Spanish speaking homes. This being November, they have only been in Kindergarten for 2 ½ months. They sat through the lesson, totally clueless; they would try so hard to please her [the reading teacher] but couldn't figure out what the words that she wanted were. The one little boy who was a dominant English speaker kept calling out the answers and drawing the pictures, while the rest of the kids sat by doing nothing. (Polly, IJE3)

Mrs. Smith, Polly's supervisor, centered her interests on helping children with "specific disabilities." She did not find it compelling that a considerable number of linguistic minority children referred to her in later grades for special education evaluations might not be receiving the academic support so crucially needed in the early years of school (ISC 12-03). This misunderstanding between what constitutes a language learning delay versus having insufficiently scaffolded target language input often yielded undesirable consequences for language minority students.

### *Rewriting Stories*

Influenced by the activities in their PRWG and others facilitated in the seminar, Sonia's and Edwina's final drafts exhibited significant changes. A closer writing partnership with Holly may have been of great impact in helping Sonia and Edwina rethink how they made sense of low-income Latino students' contexts.

While interaction with the community at large was encouraged in the seminar, it is likely that Sonia's experiences with students and families outside of school tampered with some of her prior beliefs. Mirroring Holly's proactive approach to visiting homes and "getting some awesome homemade snacks in the process," Sonia soon discovered how fortunate her "kind of poor" upbringing had been in comparison to the deprivations some of Windmill's Latino families endured. By the end of the semester, for instance, Sonia had become a mentor to Carina, a sixth grader with an extended family of eight siblings. While acknowledging that there were not many resources in a low-income home with ten mouths to feed, Sonia was quick to point out that the scarcity of material wealth did not prevent the parents from promoting "good values" to their offspring.

Drawing on those enrichment experiences, Sonia's final proposal included a more realistic depiction of the significance of understanding home environments such as Analia's:

> Like many students in Windmill, Analia is both tired and hungry. She is also a second language learner and so she must keep up in school coursework while learning English. At the end of the class I inquire why she is sleeping in class. She informs me that she does not have a bed, and sleeps on a broken recliner in her living room. At the tender age of ten she has taken on the role of a mom for her younger sibling while her mother works. Analia has taken on the responsibilities of feeding and comforting her infant brother. Like many children in Windmill, Analia faces poverty in her everyday life. Families like Analia's struggle just to provide food for their children, which does not leave room for many material possessions. Many families live with relatives just to make ends meet. Some families are even unable to provide basic needs for their children, such as beds or clothing. (Sonia, DI3)

Holly's ongoing influence in suggesting ways to write about the parents' life circumstances without "taking away their dignity" became evident in the remaining paragraphs:

> Parents are involved in the education of their kids in ways teachers often do not see. Parents may not be able to help their kids with homework when too many jobs prevent them from even seeing their children. Some have parents available at home but who might not be yet fluent in English. As a result, students are faced with the hardships of poverty and language barriers, and therefore, *teachers must find new ways to reach them* [my emphasis]. (DI3)

In addition to benefiting from peers modeling humanizing depictions of diverse families along with obtaining constructive criticism of her writing, Sonia's final draft incorporated several ideas from readings discussed in class. The notion of families' lack of English proficiency as evidence of their offspring's "at-risk" condition was depicted now as a temporary barrier ("parents might not yet be fluent"). Most compellingly, teachers rather than students bore the burden to bridge the potentially mismatched home resources and school expectations.

Simultaneously, Edwina's writing permutations about Nelly's challenges reflected an evolving understanding of the effects of poverty, rather than deficient parenting, on the lives of her students. She established open lines of communication with parents that picked up their children from the after-school program, and periodically conversed by phone with those unable to visit the building while the program was running. Participation in the PRWG and the increased interaction with families appeared to pay off, as Edwina turned in her final draft:

> My conversation with Nelly helped me to understand that her sleeping problem was very simple. A student who goes to bed at 2am and gets up at 6am to get ready for school cannot possibly stay awake for a full day of classes. On the other hand, a girl who barely sees the only available parent won't likely be a happy child either. (Edwina, DI3)

Edwina had gone to empathize with rather than *otherize* Nelly and her mother, and provided a contrast with her own upbringing:

> When I was growing up, everyone woke up roughly at the same time and had breakfast together. My parents went off to work while the kids went to school. We saw each other at dinnertime and during weekends. Unfortunately, there are parents in Windmill who cannot afford the same routine due to economic necessity.

Finally, Edwina engaged in a subliminal criticism of school practices that alienate low-income and minority parents alike:

> Nelly's mother, in her efforts to remain involved in her daughter's upbringing while providing shelter and food, is worth admiring. Yet, the message she gets from school is that she is an irresponsible parent. For a period of time Nelly's sleeping problems continued. Schools should be the places where stereotypes about Latino children are not *written out*, but rather *written off*. (DI3)

As evidenced through this article's title, Edwina's last statement summarized one of the goals of the combined experience linking long-term immersion in an urban setting with a supporting writing/research seminar. Edwina also hinted at the possibility that writing out "the facts" did not necessarily yield higher "reliability" to a study, and that "writing off" misconceptions about students may have been the "moral path" to pursue through her inquiry project. Edwina' newly acquired attitude towards struggling students was consistent with the spirit of the discussions on her PRWG, and the writing that each individual member was able to showcase at the end of the semester.

## Conclusion and Implications

This account of prospective teachers/novice researchers' experiences is reminiscent of that by Delgago-Gaitan's (1993) study about the literacy practices of minority parents. Delgado-Gaitian's initial quest to research her participants led her to subsequently redefine her role, shifting from "objective" observer to informant and facilitator for the community studied.

The writing inspired by intense contact with the urban community stakeholders, later shared and reexamined within the PRWG, enabled students like Sonia and Edwina to reconceptualize their initially narrow perspectives of the events witnessed in the field and the people involved in them. Students like Polly and Holly, open to accounting for diverse learners' challenges and potential in context, furthered their skills as "researchers of educational contexts…[that] reveal the deep structures that shape school activities…with [their] accompanying linguistic codes, cultural signs, and tacit views of the world" (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 64).

These four participants' evolution is representative of the larger sample of sixteen students, who completed inquiry project proposals involving activities such as shadowing and interacting with students in their after-school activities (including those sponsored by the public schools or neighborhood organizations). The participants also became familiar with their students' home experiences as a way to tap into their prior knowledge sources, via volunteering to assist students with at-home tutoring, participating in various after-school events, or organizing and monitoring parent-child reading programs.

Grounded in a solid theoretical framework that draws on multicultural education, service learning, and urban teacher preparation, long-term clinical experiences combined with specially designed coursework can inform teacher preparation programs in several ways. First, they expand the conceptualization and scope of urban field experiences to prepare culturally relevant and responsive teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), fostering multidirectional relationships among all stakeholders--teachers, students, families, community and prospective teachers (Murrell, 2001).

Second, process writing as the instantiation of a reflective component that interrogates what is learned in the field appears to foster prospective teachers' understanding and empathy for the lives and beliefs of the diverse peoples with which they become familiar.

Third, rather than capitulating to a potential prospective teacher socialization riddled with deficit socialization process in diverse school placements, field experiences with a broad scope founded upon engagement and reflection can help prospective teachers achieve increased levels of understanding (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996).

Finally, prospective teachers need incrementally more complex opportunities to assess the extent to which perception of a problem is attached to the identity of whoever articulates the perception (Gee, 2001). Rather than reaching an unresolved stage of guilt after witnessing that in many locations educational access appears to correlate with income level and color, prospective teachers' reflections via process writing can help them confront their biases and those of their peers in a format that invites rewriting and change.

In this study, Sonia and Edwina appeared to benefit from phased academic work in which their written assumptions were scrutinized, and alternative views were pondered for potential incorporation. The stages of their own *writing as inquiry* (Richardson, 2000) can be best appreciated when accounted for as part of a series of academic and field-based events that helped Sonia and Edwina problematize their initial deficit views of low-income, culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.

While I do not argue that teacher education programs should incorporate core coursework requirements to account for all possible unfamiliar contexts, I do contend that prospective teachers should be consistently provided with opportunities that highlight context as the lifetime partner of content knowledge and pedagogy. Prospective teachers should be expected to master the epistemological stance of questioning their own assumptions about unfamiliar populations through applied research with those populations and implicate this epistemology with their subsequent work as teachers of diverse communities.

Drawing on conceptualizations of local knowledge as a socially constructed "process of building, interrogating, elaborating and critiquing conceptual frameworks that link action and problem posing to the immediate context as well as to larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Cochran-

Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 292), the approach described in this article ultimately stems from a commitment to equal access.

Developing that "humility of practice" that Murrell (2001) deems imperative, striving to learn with and from diverse communities, and modeling the same strategies we expect prospective teachers to adopt—i.e., faculty actively engaged in urban communities and the schools where prospective teachers hone their skills—are feasible aims in the quest for educating culturally aware and sensitive practitioners who engage diverse families and communities as partners in the education of our children.

## Notes

[1] While gender, sexual orientation, and disability diversity strike all schools equally, urban schools do present an overwhelmingly high incidence of poverty and cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and national origin diversity.

[2] As early as 1980, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) issued a report in which the issue of equity was raised. Since then, multicultural education as part of teacher preparation programs has been generally considered necessary practice.

[3] Students enter the teacher education program as juniors, obtaining a bachelor's degree at the end of their senior year and a master's degree leading to certification at the end of the fifth year.

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] For the purposes of this study, the most illuminating drafts were those pertaining to the introduction, where prospective teachers had to address the significance of the educational problem they proposed to study.

[6] D= Draft (I= Introduction, LR= Literature Review; M= Methodology); IJE= Interactive Journal Exchange; SS= Seminar Session; ISC= Instructor-Supervisor Communication.

[7] An *ERIC* search with "Spanglish" as keyword yielded only eight articles ranging from 1973 to 1999, none of which were published in peer reviewed journals. Only one article appeared when the keyword was changed to "Spanish vernacular." Nineteen articles were listed in the *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* search engine. On the other hand, a *Google* website search with Spanglish as keyword yielded 57,600 entries. This is one topic that continues to attract the attention of social scientists and users, but barely addressed by educators.

[8] Sixty-nine languages from four different main groups compose what is popularly known as Mayan. The linguistic variety among immigrants from Southern Mexico and neighboring countries is much larger. In Mexico alone, there are 288 Amerindian languages spoken by 56 different ethnic groups that comprise ten percent of the country's total population.

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